ABSTRACT

The movement of people leaving and returning to China from the second half of the 19th century to the present is of such a phenomenal magnitude and complexity that Wang Gungwu has devoted a lifetime of his scholarship to tracking and explaining the various cycles of Chinese migration and settlement. Through this effort, he has not only contributed to China studies in general but has also pioneered and become the doyen of a new sub-field in the study of Chinese communities located outside of China and scattered all over the world. This has been a long and rewarding engagement for him, but not one without its moments of difficulties, especially at the conceptual level. Centering on Wang’s pool of scholarly writings and reminiscences, this article discusses his vigorous examination of the accuracy and appropriateness of various terms of analysis, such as “Nanyang Chinese,” “Overseas Chinese,” “Huaqiao,” “Greater China,” “Chinese Diaspora,” and “Chinese Overseas.” This discussion on terminology will also be used to reflect on Wang’s position on larger issues such as the danger of emotive responses to inappropriate labelling, the role of scholars in facilitating a better understanding of the contemporary world, as well as the relationship between scholarship and politics.